

# Ivories league

Piano star James Rhodes puts the class into classical, says Olivia Cole

James Rhodes is being talked about as 'the Jamie Oliver of classical music', although 'the Russell Brand' might be more apt – he has the same dishevelled looks and edgy sense of humour. Rhodes openly mocks the stereotype of the troubled artist. 'I hate that whole "I am the artist and I'm delicate and fragile". It's such bullshit.' Yet his debut album, *Razor Blades, Little Pills and Big Pianos* – a manifesto to funk up classical music – hints at a troubled past. Even the cover, shot by Dennis Morris, who snapped the Sex Pistols and Bob Marley, is rock 'n' roll. 'It sounds pretentious but it is very much about the music,' he says. 'It's not about "Look how amazing I am." It's about "Isn't it amazing that I can play this and we can listen to it."'

Rhodes started playing the piano when he was 14 and proved to be a prodigy. But five years later he showed a maverick streak when he turned down a place at the Royal College of Music, choosing instead to study psychology at UCL. A career at a financial publishing company in the City followed, but

all was far from rosy. He had ended up in rehab when most of his peers were on their gap years and he then had a serious breakdown. 'Everyone suffers. I don't think I know a single person who has not had some sort of trauma in their life,' he says. He made up his mind once and for all to turn his back on his business career and return to his first love – music.

He decided to go to Verona to have lessons with maestro Edoardo Maria Strabbioli, who was volatile and extremely dramatic – an experience Rhodes describes as 'fantastic'. 'When you are doing things you're meant to be doing, there's very little resistance.' In May 2008 he met Denis Blais – the Canadian-born impresario best known for co-founding Belgo – who became his mentor-cum-manager. Within three months Rhodes had a music deal and recorded *Razor Blades, Little Pills and Big Pianos*, a moving and virtuoso album with extremes of both joy and darkness. Bach, Chopin and Beethoven (the first composer Rhodes loved) all feature,

along with a piece by the German composer Moritz Moszkowski that, amazingly, has to be played with just one hand.

One of Rhodes's biggest fans is part-time piano obsessive Sir David Tang, who flies back from Hong Kong to hear him play. Celebrated critic Bryce Morrison is also a supporter. And Steinway loves him so much it lets him practise at its Marylebone HQ whenever he likes. These aficionados are convinced Rhodes is the real thing.

He feels contented now, but it has taken him a long time to get to this place. He hated Harrow and describes public schools as 'the most barbaric, inhumane system in the world', claiming he only got through with the help of cigarettes, drinking and the piano. The roots of his sadness, he says, go back to his deep unhappiness at a London prep school where 'the only solace was music'. 'I finally feel like an adult,' he says, 'able to do what I want to do and do

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what I love. And that makes it all right.' Playing the piano is his way of 'floating above everything'.

These days Rhodes's six-year-old son is a source of unadulterated joy. 'He's just perfect. No one's ever raised a hand to him. That's how I feel when I play the piano – totally free. I lose all track of time.'

After playing at David Tang's 53rd birthday party in Marbella, Rhodes turned down an invitation to party with Kate Moss at her villa. 'When I was getting the plane home the next morning, I told the guy sitting next to me. I just had to tell someone about it.'

He's currently dating a singer who also works as a chef (he jokes that she's his 'definition of a perfect woman'). Next stop is the House of St Barnabas in Soho for the launch (by candlelight) of his album. He's then off to New York and Europe on tour and has a concert at the Roundhouse in May. 'I've always wanted to do that – travel, study my score, turn up, play and then go home. I said to my girlfriend, "Are you going to be OK if there are, like, groupies and stuff?" She just looked at me and was, like, "Dude, you're not Jon Bon \*\*\*\*ing Jovi. You're a pianist.'" □

*Razor Blades, Little Pills and Big Pianos*, £12, is out now on Signum Classics.